The New Principal's Role in Establishing a Collaborative, Progressive Vision[*]

Max E. Fridell

Abstract

The principal new to the school enters an environment that is oftentimes a mix of excitement and apprehension. Before the new principal can begin to initiate an agenda for change that will have long-lasting effects, it would be wise to clearly understand not only the current status of the school but also the best path to take toward success. The adage applies, "If you don't know where you are going, you will wind up somewhere else" (attributed to Yogi Berra). By following a framework for collaboration and action, the new principal can frame a support network based on observation, assessment, formulation, activation, and reflection.

NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

"Looking about me upon the wide waste of liquid ebony on which we were thus borne, I perceived that our boat was not the only object in the embrace of the whirl. Both above and below us were visible fragments of vessels, large masses of building timber and trunks of trees, with many smaller articles, such as pieces of house furniture, broken boxes, barrels and staves. I have already described the unnatural curiosity which had taken the place of my original terrors. It appeared to grow upon me as I drew nearer and nearer to my dreadful doom. I now began to watch, with a strange interest, the numerous things that floated in our company."

Edgar Allen Poe, A Descent into the Maelström

Introduction

In this Edgar Allan Poe tale, a sailor, fearing he is about to be swallowed up in a gigantic whirlpool, recalls what he learned about the effects of suction pull on cylindrical objects; after strapping himself to a barrel, he abandons ship and, in the end, saves himself.

Marshall McLuhan, the pop-culture author of the 1964 Understanding Media, saw Poe's maelstrom as a symbol for potential chaos. "It's inevitable that the whirl-pool . . . will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process as it happens...we can get through" (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 228).

It is almost too obvious to apply this metaphor to education – it fits so nicely in so many places. For the focus of the principal, however, the whirlpool could come from several directions. By interpreting the maelstrom for the uncertainties faced by principals, particularly principals in new positions, it suggests that without a survival strategy, the nature of the job could suck them in and bury them with an onslaught of unwarranted attacks. For the sailor, the barrel was the object that he strapped himself onto, and it ultimately saved him. For the principal, a well-planned vision for the school could be the basis for a survival strategy. Having the foresight to ward off potential storms is reliant as much, if not more so, on the process as it is on the final product.

The idea of collaboration and ownership in developing a school vision is the foundation for establishing a broad-base of support. This process allows for the development of a culture, one that establishes agreed-upon values and justifies its existence in the face of controversy. Senge (1990) offers that a culture is people thinking together. The unity established here is part of the crucial process. The message of the actual vision, while important, pales in comparison to the idea of collaboratively establishing buy-in. "This collective vision helps focus attention on what is important, motivates staff and students, and increases the sense of shared responsibility for student learning" (Peterson, 1995, ¶ 1).

Applying a time-tested metaphor to prove the importance of both the process of developing a vision statement and its end result are not sufficient for the novice principal. How does one go about creating a vision?

1. Observe

Each new principal is met by both excitement and apprehension. To jump in too soon may give the impression that you have been hired with a specific agenda established by others. To wait too long, however, could give the impression that you are dragging your feet, are uncertain as to what to do, or are without either the motivation or wherewithal to pursue school improvement. Schools with a high turnover in principals pose a different set of challenges, and establishing an action plan based on a vision may be met with some resistance which should first be addressed. Regardless of the circumstances when you take over the helm, it will take some time to get to know your faculty, your students, your parents, and your community at large. Your first year as principal, unless the school is in crisis mode and in need of immediate upheaval, should be one of observation and documentation.

Should the tide shift and the critics begin making themselves known, you may need to move up the time line and begin to publicly announce plans to pursue the development of a steering committee. There is no definite time as to how long you will have in the "honeymoon" phase before the pressure for improvement becomes apparent. By being aware of your school's climate and by listening to the voices in your educational community, you should develop a sense as to when the time is ripe to pursue establishing a collaborative team for the purpose of building rapport and unity. Keep the key players fully informed of your desire to create a committee to pursue a redeveloped or recommitted school vision plan. These especially include, but are not limited to, the superintendent and other district office personnel. During this time, it is wise to develop an understanding as to where the school is now and what would you like the school to be like in three years, in five years, and on down the road. This is the time to take notes and prepare to move into the second phase.

For Discussion: What, as a first year principal, are some of the indicators you may wish to document for future reference in developing the school's vision?

2. Assess

Not only are the principal's hopes for the progress of the school important, but so are those of the students, faculty, staff, parents, community, and, yes, the superintendent and board of education. Assessment through

discussion groups and survey are efficient methods of receiving feedback from a wide scope of respondents. School improvement, by its very nature, means change; change, to some, is uncomfortable and could mean learning new ways of operating. Working in sequential steps with the faculty as well as with the extended school community to reconceptualize will serve to diminish unfounded fears and build strong connections.

The research on the importance of school-family relationships has been clear for years: schools operate best when a strong bond is developed. "When this partnership is extended to include the larger community, the benefits are greater yet" (Caplan, 1998, ¶ 2).

Understanding and using educational research is a critical factor in the success of a school principal. In designing the means to guide a school, principals, now more than ever, "need to understand education research, evaluate whether the research is trustworthy, and determine the usefulness of the research..." (Lauer, 2006, p. 13). One such research component pertinent to the process of designing a vision is teacher, student, and community empowerment and its key impact on successful school restructuring. "The most influence on teaching and learning is afforded at the school level, where teachers, administration, and students are engaged in a high degree of direct interaction. Members of the school community should work collaboratively in the educating of students" (Leech, Wilburn, Fulton, & Jones, 2003, p. 11).

With both assessment groups and survey instruments, the new principal should keep in mind several potential, influential forces. Among those are values, budgetary restraints (both current and projected), educational and technological trends, governmental requirements, physical space and building limitations, resources, and the process of disseminating and collecting information. Should the function be to survey what is working (i.e., satisfaction), what needs improvement (i.e., dissatisfaction), or a combination of the two? To keep things on the positive, upbeat plane, the intention of the survey instrument or discussion group should slant toward satisfaction. This will prevent alienation and seek cooperation among key individuals. The purpose is to discover the things in the school's community that mean a great deal to the respondents. Available are several commercial survey instruments (many put together by university professors), or the principal may design the instrument in order to reflect more specifically on the particular school.

For Discussion: If you were to lead a discussion group about the direction of your school, what might you put on your agenda?

For Discussion: If you were to create a survey in order to collect information for the development of a vision statement, what would you include? To whom would you administer the survey? How would you administer the survey for maximum results? What guidelines would you want to follow in preparing, administering, and interpreting the survey? How would your record the results, and to whom would you share the results?

3. Formulate

The surveys are in and the data has been tabulated. Now is the time to bring together individuals from the school community to serve on the vision committee. These committees may go by a variety of names (Vision Task Force, Progressive School Initiative, Leadership Council, Professional Action Committee, School Steering Committee, as examples). Be cautious as to what you title this committee; if the title is "Principal's Advisory Committee," then the connotative perception might be broader (or, more specific) than what was initially intended. Keep in mind, also, that this initial committee might well become the "committee on committees," that is, they may choose to form committees to address specific goals (such as learning and teaching, management and safety, information and communication technology, extra- and co-curricular activities, research, etc.).

Before you solicit committee membership, have in place a written, concrete process that you will unfalteringly follow in securing your members. Prior to making this process public knowledge, run this process by several colleagues for feedback, and frequently have someone play the "devil's advocate" to see if they can poke holes in the process. People who volunteer and are not ultimately selected may feel as if their input is not welcome and, as a result, hurt feelings may filter in and damage the climate you are trying to establish for the committee. Keep a list of names of individuals who volunteered should you establish sub-committees to address specific issues. Time and time again, it becomes the sub-committees that end up with the most significant accomplishments, and you need movers and shakers on those committees as well.

For Discussion: What might you need to consider in establishing a procedure to select committee mem-

bers?

For Discussion: What would you consider to be the ideal number of people to serve on the initial committee? How will you respond to individuals who volunteered to serve on the committee but were not selected?

4. Activate

Observing, knowing your school and community, involving key individuals and/or groups as constituencies, and identifying your own beliefs are the forerunners to structuring the elements for change. Ultimately, this steering committee should invoke the "big picture" of the school and its relationship with the community, and you should understand that, throughout the process and in the end, the beliefs you identify and hold dear are indicators of your values that you will want to see reflected in the outcomes.

Obviously, the purpose of the committee is to improve the school in order to increase student learning, heighten the enjoyment of the school experience for students and teachers, and build stronger bonds with the community. Issues involving the school would seem to take center stage in this endeavor, but, aside from the more evident school-related topics, the committee may well wish to examine the interplay of the local economy on the school; the local, state, and/or national political or governmental impacts on the school; community collaborations; social interactions of the school and the local community; etc.

As the process unfolds and the committee becomes more active in its mission, the principal is advised to encourage them to develop a pro/con or advantage/disadvantage list for each idea generated. Printed reports as follow-ups will keep everyone informed and serve to promote strong communication and consensus-building. Bringing the committee along as a group is a challenge, but made easier with strong communication that is readable, succinct, positive, engaging, and written in plain language.

How, then, with such a wide-open agenda, will you be able to overcome the inertia in order to get this committee moving? Back in 1992, Nanus devised five characteristics to assist school leaders in developing an appropriate vision. These include: attracting commitment and energizing people; creating meaning in workers' lives; establishing standards of excellence; bridging the present to the future; and transcending the status quo. While somewhat indistinct in scope, these characteristics could be the general guidelines to establish parameters for the initial work by the steering committee. Deciding what to do becomes the main challenge here, and, above all, you want the committee members to believe that their contributions are important, their time is well spent, and their purpose is ongoing.

As principal, you have spearheaded the formulation of this committee and have structured it to aim for school success. Would not it be a disaster that after all this work, you allowed it to fail simply because you were perceived as not listening. Listening is a critical skill. Being able to actively listen conveys a caring attitude upon which trust and respect may be built.

It would also be a mistake in judgment if this committee acted in isolation without being given the necessary resources needed to research the current best practices and future educational trends for students' needs. It would be an ideal, and perhaps a much simpler world if students' needs were the only ones the principal needed to examine, and, in fact, it would be wise to establish early on that the main focus of school improvement should be centered on students' needs. So, in short, as much as feasible, keep students needs as the focus of every decision.

Aligned with student needs are those things which prove to impact the school and learning, such as the current and predicted needs of parents, employers, and post-secondary institutions. Keeping an eye to the local, state, and national climates may serve to offer indicators as to what may impact your school and your students socially, economically, or technologically.

For Discussion: How might you assist your committee in considering local, state, or national trends in education?

For Discussion: How might input from employers and post-secondary institutions play an important part in the committee's focus?

For Discussion:What are some topics relating to the social development of students that might come under discussion?

5. Reflect

Even though reflection will be discussed here in isolation, it is important to note that not only is it

critical as a follow-up to the activation phase, but it should be employed throughout the entire process as well. In reflecting, it would be wise to frequently review your beliefs in order to determine if the thrust and momentum is heading in the direction you deem to be in the best interest of the students. Furthermore, your role as instructional leader (or learning leader) should be underscored in view of the responsiveness and forward thinking of the steering committee.

As the committee progresses and confronts tasks that may prove difficult, they need to believe that their actions are appreciated and that you are willing to fully support the final outcomes. Should you not be willing to accept an outcome, you need to talk it out and redirect while it is still on the drawing board instead of waiting until the committee perceives it has made a commitment to the educational community. As you work with the committee in establishing a clear, collaborative vision, questions could assist in the reflection process. These include, but are certainly not limited to:

1. Are all components of the educational community on board with the emphases set forth, or do you need to pause and go back in order to repair some faulty bridges?
2. Are certain individuals being left out of the picture, and, if so, is this a purposeful move for the betterment of the school?
3. What, precisely, is the committee planning for? Are the messages generated by the committee clear and understandable?
4. What will be monitored and by whom?
5. What are the things that can easily slide into place with over-kill or over-emphases?
6. What benchmarks, once attained, can be recognized and celebrated along the way?
7. What behaviors from students, faculty, and the educational community at large are you willing to confront?
8. Have the "naysayers" gathered a voice and how will you handle this negativism?
9. Has the threat of criticism delayed progress; has complacency replaced rigor and robustness?
10. Has tradition established unwarranted stopgaps in the progress of establishing an active vision?
11. Is the vision encapsulated in short-term thinking, or is the vision progressive and predictive?
12. Does the vision support high expectations for all students? Does the vision reflect academic excellence?
13. Are social responsiveness and equity being addressed?
14. When the dust settles, do the students come first?

The use of reflection as a viable means to assess growth has been visible in the school setting for quite some time. The use of this means to ascertain the success of the collaboration efforts is something that every member on the steering committee should become familiar with and readily use in order to determine effectiveness and direction.

For Discussion:How might you assist your committee by establishing the means to reflect on appropriate progress? How will you go about leading a reflection with your committee members? Do you see the need to reflect beyond a committee discussion? If so, what ideas do you have for handling such an assessment?

Conclusion.

Key to invigorating a school is understanding the school as it currently exists. Once established, the principal new to a building can turn to securing broader participation in decision making. By observing, assessing, listening, structuring key people on meaningful committees, activating the process, and, all the while, reflecting on the committee's collaborative direction of progress, the new principal can lead an initiative that would serve to enhance education. The building leaders of today's schools must embrace participatory leadership, form support groups built on trust and respect, develop an active vision that strengthens bonds with the educational community at large, remain in alignment with values that support academic excellence and equity, and pave the way for smooth sailing. Should a maelstrom develop, calm the waters by studying the issue at hand, remaining professional, relying upon those of whom you have forged a strong bond, and offering clear responses. All this is possible because you planned your navigation with diligence and foresight.

References

Caplan, J. G. (1998). Critical issue: Constructing school partnerships with families and community groups. North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/is

Lauer, P. A. (2006, May/June). What principals need to know about education research. NAESP Principal, 85:5, 12-17.

Leech, D. W., Wilburn, K. T., Fulton, C. R., & Jones, J. T. (2003, Fall). Teacher perceptions of shared decision making. NCPEA Education Leadership Review, 4:2, 6-13.

McLuhan, E. & Zingrone, F. (Eds.). (1995). Essential McLuhan. Concord, Ontario, Canada: Ananasi Press, Ltd.

McLuhan, M. (1964). Understanding media. New York: Signet Books.

Nanus, B. (1992). Visionary leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Peterson, K. (1995). Critical issue: Building a collective vision. North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le100.htm

Poe, E. A. (n.d.). A descent into the maelström[1] [Electronic version]. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from http://web-books.com/Classics/Poe/Stories/Descent_1.htm

Senge, P. M. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization. New York: Doubleday.

---

[1] http://web-books.com/Classics/Poe/Contents.htm